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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DUSHANBE 001211

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/9/2019

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SUBJECT: THE SUGHD REGION: HOUSE-TO-HOUSE SEARCHES FOR ISLAMISTS AND INCANDESCENT LIGHBULBS

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: A raid by government security forces on a house in Isfara on November 18 was the latest in a string of violent incidents in Sughd Oblast. Though Tajikistan's second largest city, Khujand, considered by many Tajiks to be the center of Tajikistan's intelligentsia, is in Sughd, it also has two of Tajikistan's most conservative cities, Isfara and Istravshan. Traditional religious leaders in these cities are quietly pushing back against the government's repressive new law on religion, while at the same time they resist the spread of Islamic radicalism among local youth. Northerners resent the dominance of Kulyabis and Dangarans in the national government and the many Kulyabis President Rahmon has appointed to Sughd's security organs. Though the Oblast is inaccessible by road from Dushanbe during the winter, administrators have fulfilled Dushanbe's orders with thuggish efficiency, such as going house-to-house to ensure that residents use energy-efficient light bulbs in accordance with the President's September decree.

Leaders of Sughd regional opposition political parties doubt that February's Parliamentary elections will be free and fair, said their parties lack a strategy to contest the polls at the national level, and request U.S. support to fund a platform for political debate on a private Tajik television station. END SUMMARY

ISFARA DISTRICT: SPORADIC SHOOTOUTS ALONG THE POROUS BORDER

12. (SBU) The left side of the road from Khujand to Isfara is Tajik territory; Kyrgyz territory is on the right. Only the languages written on opposing market's billboards signal the territorial boundary. Unmarked, serpentine borders delineated by Stalin in the 1920s have made the eastern Sugd Oblast/Kyrgyzstan border region an optimal smuggling route for narco-traffickers and other criminal elements, as well as a safehaven for small, armed bands of domestic and regional opposition groups. Since the 1990s, these criminal and political groups have cooperated to engage in joint business activities and, sporadically, attack local government officials.

13. (SBU) On September 19, an unknown gunman assassinated the Ministry of Interior's Criminal Investigation Chief in Isfara. On October 14, a group of armed men shot at Kyrgyz border guards and entered Kyrgyzstan from the Tajik village of Chorku. On October 18, Tajik security forces raided a house in Isfara, reportedly killing four militants and detaining one. Asia-Plus reports that police suspect that detainee in the September assassination of the MoI official. Though the MoI announced that one member of the Tajik Special forces was injured in the

Isfara raid, other sources told the Embassy that two were killed during the operation. On October 19 in the Vorukh enclave, Tajik police arrested four men suspected of the Kyrgyz border post attack.

¶4. (SBU) Tajikistan Interior Ministry officials claim that the five militants targeted in the Isfara raid were members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Many observers in the area, however, believe that the men were members of a local criminal group with Islamist ties, noting that none of the men killed or detained in the raid were Uzbek. In conversations with Poloff, several Sughd Oblast residents speculated that the group was made up of local men angered that Kulyabis policing the area were fraternizing with local women. One journalist suggested to Poloff that the local MoI officials' classification of the men as IMU is a means both for their own self-promotion and to justify tougher security measures in the area.

#### COUNTERTERRORISM AND LIGHTBULBS

¶5. (SBU) At the Isfara Office of the Center for Human Rights, legal advocates said that government officials conducted house-to-house searches for militants in Isfara in the evening, but that the area is otherwise calm. Officials also have gone door-to-door to verify compliance with President Rahmon's recent ban on incandescent lightbulbs, reportedly carrying sacks of energy-efficient bulbs to sell to Isfara residents who are non-compliant. The bulbs cost four times more than regular lightbulbs, and many Tajiks speculate that the President and his

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family, as well as the local officials enforcing the law, are personally profiting from the lightbulb campaign. As most of the energy-efficient bulbs are low-quality Chinese knock-offs, nearly every meeting in with interlocutors in Sughd Oblast took place under a greenish, eerie, dim light.

¶6. (SBU) In Isfara, a religiously conservative town where men and women sit separately in public buses, local officials are not attempting to vigorously enforce the government's restrictive 2009 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. Girls are generally permitted to attend classes wearing a hijab, but very few girls study past the ninth grade, when they are permitted to drop out. Labor problems in Isfara district are a major concern and the Center for Human Rights NGO is working with many families whose migrant fathers abandoned them after going to work in Russia. In other cases, the Center assists Tajik migrants who were victims of exploitation while working abroad. The Center is also dealing with problems caused by local officials who use their power to control business and labor. According to the NGO, the Isfara Administrator pressured local farmers to grow only tomatoes after he cut a deal with a Russian company to barter Isfara pasta sauce for Russian goods in kind. The NGO assists farmers who claim they were not adequately compensated.

¶7. (SBU) At a mosque in Chorku, a small town where the October 14 border incident occurred, the Deputy Imam downplayed the problem of religious extremism in the area. When Poloff asked about the rise of fundamentalist Islamist groups, such as the outlawed Salafis, the Imam responded, "We solved that problem. Some of the young men studied at foreign mosques and came back with wrong ideas. We met with them after they came back and put them on the right path." He said that the Council of Ulamo, the religious body established by the President to advise and monitor religious practices, sends proposed lists of topics for

use during his Friday sermons, but "if they send me a year of topics, maybe I use two of them. My first obligation is to preach Islam, but I also must follow the law and not call for jihad."

¶18. (SBU) The Vorukh enclave, located entirely inside Kyrgyzstan, is a smuggling center surrounded by snow-capped peaks. There are no checkpoints on the road to Vorukh, which runs from Tajikistan through Kyrgyz territory and into the enclave. Poloff wished to discuss recent events with Tajik border guards, but could not find any there. A detachment of MoI, Customs Police, and Police Commandos with assault weapons stopped cars on the return from Vorukh to Chorku. They informed Poloff that there were no Tajik border guards permanently stationed in the area.

#### ISTRAVSHAN: IMAMS NOT THE LISTENING TYPE

¶19. (SBU) Istravshan, an ancient town of merchants and old mosques on the western side of the Sughd Oblast near the Uzbek border, is enjoying an Islamic revival. Mosque attendance is up and more girls are wearing the hijab. Two Istravshan Imams told Poloff that local authorities did not strongly enforce the new law on religion because of opposition by the religious community. When a member of the government-sponsored Council of Ulamo attended Imam Nomoniton's Friday mosque during Ramadan, the Imam, via loudspeaker, told the Council member that it would be unadvisable for the government to enforce regulations banning the hijab and beards in schools, suggesting that local Muslims would resist such measures. The Imam's daughter attends school wearing a hijab, and only one school in town reportedly enforces the ban. Some administrators have told parents that their hijab-wearing daughters could attend classes, but remain home when there is a government inspection.

¶10. (SBU) Imam Nomoniton's nephew, Imam Hamzakhon, an IVLP returnee, spent an hour debating U.S. foreign policy with Poloff. While he argued against U.S. military intervention in the Muslim world, he also opposed the radicalization of young Tajiks who studied at foreign madrassahs, lamenting that the trend would lead to "confrontation and chaos." (NOTE: The Imam

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also expressed doubt that a small group of Arabs could have evaded U.S. security measures to execute the September 11 attacks. Poloff reminded him that while he was in the United States, he wasn't subjected to much scrutiny either.)

¶11. (SBU) None of the Sughd region Imams received invitations to the October conference on Abu Hanifa organized by the government in Dushanbe. Asked by the Poloff why the government did not invite traditional Muslim leaders from the provinces, Imam Nomoniton responded, "Because we are not the listening type."

#### TAKING A STICK TO THE LIGHTBULB PROBLEM

¶12. (SBU) A local NGO representative told Poloff that the human rights environment had generally deteriorated over the last few years. He added that local officials in the heavily-Uzbek populated Shahrison district had entered homes and used nightsticks to break the recently banned incandescent lightbulbs. Remarking that nearly every bulb in the district

had been replaced, he concluded that "It shows that the government can actually accomplish something when it really wants to!" He described the heavy-handed enforcement of the lightbulb law as the work of overzealous henchmen, citing a Tajik proverb, "You ask them to give you a turban, they give you a head.'" He complained of the domination of Kulyabis in the government, noting that 16 of 20 judges the President recently appointed were from his home region. And to the chagrin of many in Istravshan, after the city announced a celebration to mark 1,500 years of its existence, Kulyab announced that it would celebrate its own 1,700th birthday.

KHUYAND: OPPOSITION POLITICAL PARTIES COMMISERATE AND ASK FOR  
USG SUPPORT

¶13. (SBU) The jaded leaders of the Sughd Oblast's main opposition parties, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT) and the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT), expressed pessimism that February 2010 parliamentary elections would be free and fair. The old election law which governed the flawed 2005 elections has not been updated, opposition parties receive little or no coverage in the media, and the leader of the DP, Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, remains in prison since he was convicted of trumped up charges in 2004. The DPT and SDPT are unsure of how far they can go in contesting elections for the national parliament, since the entry fee per candidate is 12,000 somoni (approximately \$2,700), and they have little hope to win a seat. All three party officials urged that the USG do everything possible to push for free elections in February.

¶14. (SBU) The representative of the IRPT, which currently has two seats in Parliament (one of which is vacant), reported that the IRPT likely will run candidates on a party list, but not contest individual districts, limiting the IRPT's potential to increase its number of seats. He suggested that the opposition parties focus on contesting seats in the Sughd Oblast parliament, where the opposition parties are currently not represented despite widespread disdain for many of the President's policies in the Sughd region.

¶15. (SBU) The leader of the Sughd Oblast SDPT, Dilbar Samadova, complained that the opposition parties only got time on government television stations for one night during election season, leading many Khujand residents to call them "seasonal parties." In contrast, "If someone from the pro-presidential party helps someone carry a sack of potatoes, they play it over and over again on television." She proposed that the USG fund a Khujand NGO which seeks to organize a political debate program on a private television station, including all political parties. Post will follow up with the NGO to provide an application for a Democracy Commission grant.

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¶16. (C) COMMENT: Intermittent violent incidents continue to cause concern in the Sughd region, but it is unclear to our local contacts whether this is extremism or criminal in nature. The government does not help the situation by appointing outsiders from Kulyab to fill security positions, thereby alienating the local community. It also does not endear itself when dispatching security officials to enforce the lightbulb law, which is very unpopular throughout the country. The Imams Poloff spoke with opposed radicalism, but also did not see themselves as partners with the government, and were excluded from the government's hollow religious initiatives. For now,

they seemed content with limited autonomy over the religious life of their regions as the government backs off enforcement of the religion law. The opposition political parties in the region reflected the same general concerns as their national level leaders. Notably, the IRPT does not seem much focused on religious freedom issues. Analysts and party leaders have commented elsewhere that they benefit from the government's hostility to Salafis and other conservative religious movements since this makes the IRPT more attractive to the disaffected and still keeps Islamist rivals to the IRPT under control. End Comment.  
GROSS